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[Mean Girls, Bullies, Study Sheds Light on School Cliques](http://www.newswise.com/articles/mean-girls-bullies-study-sheds-light-on-school-cliques)

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Newswise — Girls who gossip and exclude others from their cliques are often labeled as popular by their classmates, and nearly all high school cliques are divided along racial lines, according to University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) sociologist Casey Borch, Ph.D.

Borch co-authored a study with Antonius Cillessen, Ph.D., at the Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen and the University of Connecticut, to determine how aggression, popularity and academic achievement influenced membership in cliques. The study will be published as a chapter in the forthcoming book "Modeling Dyadic and Interdependent Data in Developmental Research" later this year.

The researchers surveyed nearly 600 boys and girls, starting in the 4th grade through the 12th grade, in a public school system in a working class community in the Northeast from 1995-2004.

The study found that physical aggression helped popularity in the earlier grades but not as the children grew older. Membership in physically aggressive cliques tended to decline over time whereas membership in cliques where students gossiped, spread rumors and excluded others, which is called relational aggression, remained constant over time.

In fact, the study found that behaviors such as gossiping and spreading rumors increased the perceived popularity, or social visibility, of the students over time, Borch said. "So how well known you are is enhanced by one's ability to be relationally aggressive. So a lot of popular kids may not be well liked, but they are relationally aggressive and their peers think that they are popular. So it makes some sense that relational aggression is a chosen tactic used by adolescents interested in popularity.

"The 'mean girls' effect suggests that girls engage more in this type of behavior more than boys," says Borch, "and as a rule, they do, but the people who gain more from this behavior are minority boys. Minority boys who are relationally aggressive gained a lot more popularity over time than any other group, although, they were less likely to use the behavior.

"One surprising finding was that in the fourth grade about 50 percent of the cliques were of mixed race and ethnicity, but by the 12th grade, nearly 90 percent of cliques were of the one race or ethnicity," says Borch, "so only 10 percent were mixed. This was even more surprising given the increasing ethnic diversity of the school system we studied over time. We did not expect to see the racial composition of the cliques to go from 50 percent mixed to just 10 percent."

For their study, the researchers had students write down the names their best friends. To identify the cliques, the researchers compared the lists to determine whether students' feelings were reciprocated.

The study subjects also were asked to identify the overtly aggressive classmates - those who regularly started fights, said mean things or bullied others " and those who gossiped, told rumors or excluded others from a group. Then students were asked to rate the school's cliques on popularity, social preference and overt and relational aggression.

"Cliques aren't necessarily bad," says Borch. "It just depends on the kind of clique a child is in. The common misconception is that they [cliques] are inherently bad and that kids in cliques exclude other people or that they are separatists or that they're somehow disconnected from the larger network as a whole and that is fundamentally not true.

"Kids are good social observers," says Borch. "They know who the aggressive kids are and who's popular. So listen to your kids. If they say someone is trouble, they may very well be."